

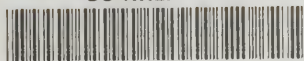
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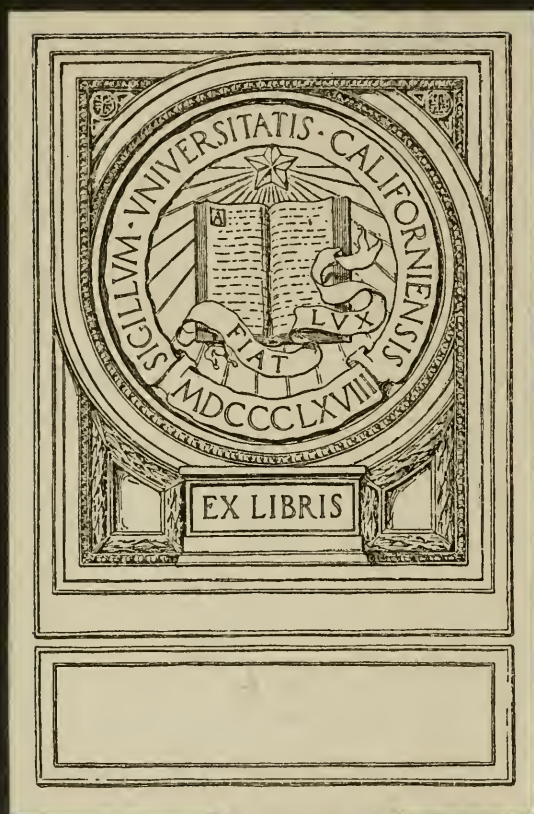
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The Library Assistants' Association Series.

No. 6.

THE LIBRARY COMMITTEE :
ITS CHARACTER
AND
WORK.

BY

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

The following pages are a part of a lecture delivered by the writer at the London School of Economics. They were written before the appearance of Mr. William Law's useful paper on the subject; and their publication may seem superfluous in view of that article. It may be premised, however, that any written result of experiences in committee procedure will be useful by way of suggestion and comparison, and perhaps this excuse for their publication here will be accepted.*

**The Library Assistant*, v. XI., pp. 65-73, 1914.

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The Library Committee: Its Character and Work.

By W. C. BERWICK SAYERS, Croydon Public Libraries.

The government of any public institution is vested in two types of worker as a rule, the honorary and unpaid, and the salaried and professional; and it is the character and relative work of these which form our subject.

The composition and character of committees vary according to the type of Libraries. We cannot generalize in regard to libraries other than municipal, and we shall not attempt to deal with such bodies, except to say that committee procedure in all committees is very much the same; so that, as far as the mere business routine is concerned, if we can conduct one committee, we can probably conduct *any* committee. Beyond that, we shall confine ourselves to the library committee administering the Public Libraries Acts.

The tendency in public life for the last two generations has been towards decentralisation. Public health, public education, and much of the administration of law has been delegated to local authorities rather than retained by the government. This has greatly increased the importance and complexity of the urban authority. The control of the public library is one of the

duties vested in this body; and when one considers the composition of the average urban authority—of men of varying shades of character, mostly of the trading class and of every degree (more or less) of culture—of men who necessarily are more interested in roads, housing, water supply, lighting and the hundred and one material needs of a locality—the wisdom of the legislators in permitting these authorities to add men other than themselves to the Library Committee becomes evident. In the case of Scotland outside help is insisted upon; in England the Public Libraries Act permits the local authority to co-opt non-members of the authority to serve on the Library Committee, and this is almost universally done. Committees vary in number of members according to the size of the town; but generally speaking they range from six to thirty in number, and twelve is a very general average. Usually there are members representing every ward in the town—a pernicious system in that it leads men to contemplate the wishes of their own particular wards, rather than the needs of the whole community. In any case, for effective business, and ease in working, small committees are much better than large ones; and, where the committee has more than six members, sub-committees are desirable, as we shall show in a moment.

The ideal committee is composed half of sound business men, and half of men distinguished in some way for intellectual attainments. Each acts as a wholesome check upon the other. The idea that a Library committee should consist entirely of experts is alluring in theory, but experts not only are *not* business men as a rule; they often over-emphasise one subject, and more often are out of touch with the vital necessities of the public. The reasoning of a man of only average education, with sound commonsense and the average man's point of view, is a valuable corrective; while the knowledge of the specialist, thus corrected, is of inestimable worth to the Library.

A most important point arises on the appointing of a Library committee—should it be a *recommending* or a *reporting* body. A Committee, which is a recommending body, has no power to expend money, or to carry out work except by the direct approval of the Urban authority. Thus, every month, or more often, its work with recommendations must be placed on the agenda of the authority and be approved or disapproved. The disadvantage of this too common system is that the work of one body is subjected to scrutiny by another body which is largely out of touch with it; and many members of the Library Committee are not able to defend their recommendations in the Town Council of which they are not members.

On the other hand we have what is known as *delegation of powers*. Here the Town Council elects the Library Committee, hands it the Library income, and empowers it to expend if for library purposes; and only requires periodical reports. It places certain limitations on the powers of the Committee. Usually it reserves to itself: the imposing and collecting of the library rate; the borrowing of moneys for the erection of library buildings; the erection of library buildings and the extension of branches; the appointment or dismissal of the chief librarian. But all matters of library policy and administration, salaries, etc., it allows the Committee to deal with. This type of committee is usually able to produce better results than the other type which is subjected to the delays of the Town Council.

It is important to note, however, that delegation of powers is impossible in London. The Local Government Act, 1899, requires that all expenditures of more than £50 must first be approved by the Metropolitan Borough Council. In all other places delegation of powers is an ideal to be striven for.

Presuming our Committee has been appointed, how should it proceed to work? It should have brief, sufficient standing orders, which require the election of a chairman and a vice-chairman annually, and a settled method of business. The Librarian should always be clerk to the Committee; it often happens that the town clerk or some other official occupies this office, but no one is in a position to understand and to carry out the working of the Committee as well as the Librarian.

When a large committee sets out to discuss a question involving detail, it nearly always flounders hopelessly, much time is lost, and the work is done doubtfully. To expedite the detailed work of the Committee the standing orders require the annual election of a number of sub-committees. Again, the needs of the Library will determine what these shall be. Every authority, however, will probably require

- (a) A Finance and General Purposes Sub-Committee;
- (b) A Book Sub-Committee;
- (c) An Officers' Sub-Committee.

Where there are buildings and grounds it is usual to have a Buildings Sub-Committee; and in one or two systems a Visiting Sub-Committee is appointed the members of which pay periodical visits of inspection to the various libraries of the town. This Sub-Committee is better absent as a rule, as its business often spells amateur interference with the administrative work of the Librarian—and the administrative work of the Librarian is a

sphere into which few literary committeemen are competent to enter.

Committees usually meet once a month—in some libraries once a quarter. A week's notice of the Meeting is usually given, and in the case of reporting Committees the Meeting is held a few days before that of the Town Council. With the summons to the Meeting an agenda of the order of business is usually sent out. This agenda, which is drawn up by the clerk to the committee, runs as follows :

1. To sign Minutes of the Previous Meeting.
2. To receive reports of Sub-Committees.
3. To examine bank balance.
4. To authorise the payment of accounts.
5. To receive the Librarian's report.
6. To consider special business.
7. Any other business.

This agenda is worked through in this order. The minutes are read by the clerk, approved or amended by the meeting, and signed by the chairman. The sub-committees report and recommend briefly on the matters in their jurisdiction. Sometimes this report is made verbally by the chairman of each Sub-Committee; sometimes the minutes of the Sub-Committee are "read by way of report" and are approved by the General Committee. The principal item from our standpoint is the Librarian's report, which gives the chief officer the opportunity of laying the needs of his department before the Committee in a regular and effective form. It should contain:—A summary of the issues from all departments during the period covered by the report; a list of donors; any special staff matters; and, if necessary a general survey of the condition of the buildings, etc.

After the meeting the Librarian draws up a synopsis of the minutes, which is approved by the Chairman, and then sent to the Town Clerk as the Report to the Council. This will naturally embody in brief precise terms, any recommendations of the Committee.

It will be seen that, generally speaking, library committee business is simple, and can be conducted very speedily. We should bear in mind that minutes, reports, explanations should be concise and to the point; few committees have any inclination to listen to lengthy details.

Although the General Committee retains control over their proceedings, the principal business of the Committee is done by the Sub-Committees; and a brief account of their work is desirable. These meet on the same day as the General Committee as a rule, but an hour earlier; and, as the Committees are generally

distinct in membership, it is possible for all sub-committees to meet simultaneously. This is not desirable, however, as the presence of the chairman and librarian is a great advantage to each. They, therefore, usually are arranged to succeed one another at hourly or other suitable intervals.

The Finance and General Purposes Sub-Committee examines the accounts, checks the Librarian's expenditures, and authorises the payment of bills. It would consider any proposed activity of the library in its financial aspect, and report—not so much on its advisability as upon its practicability in view of the income of the Library.

A much more difficult Committee, and one to be prepared for with care, is the Books Sub-Committee. Its sphere is the consideration of the books, periodicals and newspapers which shall be added to the library. I am not allowed to deal with the question of book-selection which is closely related to the work of this Sub-Committee: I have only to touch upon committee method. The Librarian prepares a list of the books that he recommends should be purchased. This list is duplicated, and sent out to the Books Sub-Committee with the summons to the meeting; and it is presumed that the members examine the list before they attend—they *do* examine it sometimes. The list should give full particulars of the books, authors, titles at length, publishers and prices, with an indication of whether they are net or discount. Where there are branch libraries, letters or other symbols should indicate the departments into which it is proposed that the books shall be placed. Usually the list is in alphabetical order of authors, the non-fiction, however, being divided from the fiction. Some librarians, though, prefer to arrange their lists under the heads of the library classification. This seems a good method, but as books are rarely—if ever—published in any proportion to classification, such lists are often lop-sided. It is sometimes well to asterisk the more urgently needed works.

At the meeting the Chairman slowly reads through the list, and the books are passed one by one. If the committee is a congenial one and has faith in the omniscience of the librarian, the process is a simple one; often, on the other hand, it is an ordeal for the librarian. Quibbling over the cost of books; sudden questions on the literary value or the public demand for this or that; objections by members who don't approve of books promulgating certain views—these are the common tribulations of the Librarian in contact with his books committee. It behoves him, therefore, to be prepared. Not only must he be quite sure of the books he recommends; he should be prepared

to back up his recommendation. To this end he should annotate each title on his own copy of the book-list with particulars; he should also make a reference to the review upon which he bases his recommendation; and should have the copies of the reviews so indicated ready to hand in the committee room. The fact that *The Times*, *The Athenæum*, or some similarly august review says that such and such a work is "excellent" or "admirable," naturally carries much weight. This is more particularly true of special reviews when noticing scientific or technical works.

Other difficulties the Librarian occasionally has to face, and to overcome if possible, is the crank who has a perverse idea of the value to the community of a particular subject in which he is interested, and who would spend a disproportionate sum on books upon it; the "ward" man who takes a purely parochial view of his duties and wants all he can get for the branch library in his ward, often at the expense of the library system as a whole; and one of the most constant of troubles is the unwillingness of many committees to buy expensive books. In this last case the popular but erroneous idea that modern technical and reference works can be bought cheaply is so engrained that to pay half-a-guinea for one makes them pause, and the suggestion of a three-guinea work is a case for positive shivering.

The Books Sub-Committee also deals with the contents of the reading and newspaper rooms. So far as periodicals and newspapers are concerned, some libraries judge of them only once a year—just before the new year. This seems a good plan, as the addition or rejection of magazines or newspapers should receive consideration only in relation to all other periodicals received at the libraries. In theory, too, the Books Sub-Committee examines and accepts or rejects donations; in practice the Chairman does this work; and in some libraries the librarian does it. In these days of partisan papers, the librarian, if he is wise, will seek other shoulders than his own to bear the burdens of accepting or rejecting.

The Buildings Sub-Committee, or Property Sub-Committee, is usually appointed only when the committee are holders of several or large buildings. Otherwise its work is performed by the Finance and General Purposes Sub-Committee. Its duties are to pay periodical visits to the various properties of the Committee, to consider lighting, heating, decoration, repairs, renovations, and the multitude of matters connected with building fabrics. Nothing surprises the inexperienced more than the unending work of repairing and maintaining a large building. Every defect that appears must be made good at once; there is no more disastrous thing than to delay even minor repairs.

The Officers' Sub-Committee considers appointments, salaries, and the status of library staffs. Usually it confines its attention to the appointment and duties of senior officials, and the Chairman and Librarian deal with questions affecting juniors, porters and other minor members of staff. In the nature of things this body has less work than any other.

A final consideration is the discretionary power allowed to the Chairman and to the Librarian. Seeing that Committees rarely meet more frequently than once a month and sometimes once a quarter, matters are sure to transpire in the intervals which need immediate decision. It is therefore customary to give the Chairman a certain latitude of decision, subject to later report to the Committee. In the same way the Librarian should have power to spend money upon urgent matters,—books, repairs, fittings, supplies or other matters,—up to a certain amount, which should be made sufficiently elastic.

Real difficulties may occur when the Library Committee assumes the function of the Librarian; and we must have clear views on this point. The function of the Committee is with policy, "what shall be done; what aims are to be followed; what ideals cherished." That of the Librarian is administrative: the carrying out of the policy; the methods of pursuing aim and ideal; and whenever the Committee attempts to interfere in the matter complications ensue. It is the sphere of the Librarian therefore to decide the duties of the staff, the methods of cataloguing and classification, the system of registration, charging and all other purely technical matters. This ideal has not been attained fully yet; but it is the acknowledged ideal.

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